

Full Circle

Julie Anne

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CHAPTER 1

“Those who can, do, and those who can’t, teach,” Mary Chrysler announced as she walked confidently into the classroom on the first day of class. Most of the students looked at her with a confused smile, wondering if she realized it was a self-deprecating comment. She paused for a moment, surveying the young faces and said, “I’m Dr. Mary Chrysler and I’ve spent the last 16 years at the Office of the Medical Investigators in Albuquerque. It was a tremendous opportunity, at times a physically and emotionally exhaustive tenure, and it was also an unspeakable nightmare. But I wouldn’t have traded it for the world.”

With that last statement, the faces of the students turned from concern to intrigue. She continued her lightly rehearsed introduction, adding “I realized recently that I could add more value to the field of forensic science by sharing my experiences with others, so that is why I am here with you today. I hope that in the next several weeks you get a solid idea of what it takes to blend medical and forensic science with a good dose of intuition and morality.” Mary smiled slightly, looked down, and as she raised her head said, “That’s a hell of a lot to cram into just a few short weeks but let’s work together, shall we?”

Until six months ago, Mary had enjoyed a successful career at the Office of the Medical Investigator in Albuquerque. She’d spent 16 years at the OMI, examining some of the most gruesome deaths the state of New Mexico had ever seen. It was a perfect position for her, combining her scientific acumen with her persistent curiosity.

That was until late last year, when she abruptly left her position, her family, her friends, and her Albuquerque residence behind. She found another job in a different city and gave three weeks notice. To her surprised colleagues and family, it was as compulsive as it was irrational, but Mary spent no time explaining her decision to anyone.

Her new job with The College of the Southwest in Carlsbad, New Mexico, took Mary away from the hands-on experience of forensic medicine at the OMI, and into a more analytical role as a professor in the school’s Department of Criminal Justice and Homeland Security. Here, Mary could discuss the scientific, analytical, and even emotional aspects of the job. That wasn’t something she ever saw herself doing – discussing anything beyond a molecular level – but it was certainly a welcomed change, and a change she felt compelled to make.

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After her unusual introduction, Mary's students were completely engaged. Although she had experience giving seminars at the OMI from time to time, she had never spoken publicly in an academic arena. This first class was a major confidence booster, quelling her doubts about her drastic move. Perhaps teaching was her gift, and perhaps this career would leave her feeling fulfilled.

As she continued to lecture, she was able to completely suspend any thoughts of her past life. She was feeling every bit the part of teacher and mentor. A fair complected, relatively thin woman with a trendy sense of style appropriate for her 40-plus years, Mary fit every bit the part of the college professor. She certainly wasn't the stodgy old man in tweed, nor was she trying too hard to fit in with the young crowd. Her welcoming demeanor, both physically and mentally, earned her acceptance by the students that very first day.

After class, Mary calmly gathered her materials and suddenly smelled the cinnamon apple tea of a coworker. The smell immediately thrust her back into her adolescence. Her grandmother would make hot cider at Christmas, and just that quickly, with one whiff, she was back in that house. She could feel the silence, the calm, the serenity of Grandma's. Mary broke a faint, crooked smile as she recalled the afternoons she'd spent running in her yard and playing on her porch.

"What's got you grinning?" a fellow professor inquired as she stepped into the vacated classroom. "Oh, just that smell. It takes me back some, that's all," Mary replied, still half grinning.

"It would be nice to be back in that place from time to time, I can tell," she said.

Mary paused, looking up from her glasses and replied "You ain't kidding!"

Of all of the members of the faculty that Mary had met so far, Geraldine Sholski seemed like a good candidate for friendship. Not just because she had a contagious enjoyment for her job, or because she was just a few years Mary's senior, but because she had a certain soothing effect on things. Always calm and smiling, Mary felt that Geraldine lacked the drama that seemed inherent in so many people. She and Geraldine had already lunched on two occasions and Geraldine even gave Mary a ride home when they had first met. The conversations the two women shared during those brief interludes were unstrained, in part at least, because Geraldine did not ask a lot of personal questions. Mary would offer up small nuggets of intimacy, but only to audiences

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that would not pry for more. Maybe that was a defense mechanism, or maybe Mary just insisted on being in control.

“I’m going to go look at a place tomorrow, finally,” Mary said while turning for the door.

“Just make sure it’s got lots of closets and a cute handyman next door,” Geraldine said, winking.

“Oh yeah, and room for a wet bar in your bedroom,” she added with a chuckle.

Mary grinned once more and said, “Yeah, I wish. It’s away from the campus, but not too far of a commute. I think it’ll be at least far enough to separate job from home.”

Geraldine shook her head in agreement, saying, “That’s perfect. You don’t need to blur those lines, it’s just not healthy.”

“I need to see it, though, because it’s supposedly a fixer-upper in the middle of nowhere. Who knows what kind of shape it’s in,” Mary said as they walked down the hall.

Geraldine patted Mary’s shoulder and said “Well good luck, then. But don’t buy it just to buy it, because you’ve got enough new things to deal with without taking on one more.”

As she turned to the door, Mary nodded in agreement and thanked Geraldine for her advice.

As Mary walked out to her car, she suddenly realized that this was it. Not only was she settling in at her new job, but now she was planting roots by purchasing a home – something she’d never done her whole life living in Albuquerque. “This better work, this just better frigging work,” she mumbled to herself as her expression fell, and she climbed into her car.

Singing at the top of her lungs, Mary was thoroughly enjoying the drive out to Artesia, New Mexico, to see the house that was for sale. In certain uninhibited moments, Mary was quite youthful and down right perky. This aspect of her personality was frequently squelched by the long hours at work and the depressing nature of her cases. Perhaps this new teaching gig would allow that

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playfulness to surface, unrestrained by stress or sadness. At least in this job there's time to think about what you're doing and the stress is not at a constant high. At least this job should allow her time to care for a home, something she never even contemplated in Albuquerque.

Finding the house wasn't difficult, as it was the last of very few homes on the long dirt road. The real estate agent was already there, having had plenty of time to brush the dust off of his meticulously ironed khakis and his leased automobile. Now that she had a face to put with the name of her agent, all of Mary's preconceived notions surfaced. Yes, he wanted to unload this property and, yes, he'll tell her whatever she needs to hear to make that happen.

As she walked up to the somewhat dilapidated porch, Mary greeted him with an extended arm and said, "I'm Mary Chrysler, I guess you must be Josh."

"Great to meet you Mary," he said, peeling back a pearly smile that would make Wink Martindale envious. As he held onto her right hand and gently grabbed her arm with his left hand, he said "Let me show you the place, you're gonna love it."

The tour of the house took a mere 15 minutes, mostly because it was only a two-bedroom ranch home with no basement. The property was a full 6 acres, much more than necessary to accommodate such a small house. Mary loved the location, just a half hour from work. She also loved the feeling of isolation out there, as if she was hundreds of miles away from her professional life, and even farther from the life she'd left behind.

Artesia had the kind of downtown you'd miss if you blinked while driving through it, although it still possessed all of its civic necessities. The house was a lot like her grandma's place, and that had to be a sign. Knowing that the price was dirt-cheap and the disrepair of the house would serve as a much-needed distraction, Mary knew instantly that she was meant to live there.

"I think I'll take it," she told Josh with a smile.

He smiled back, and warned, "Now, you know that it needs some work, right? I would never jeopardize the well-being of a client just to make a sale, you know."

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With his insincerity transparent, Mary just giggled and said, “Yes, of course, Josh. I know that I’m buying into a part-time job here, but at least it’s got electricity and plumbing. What else do I need?”

The two of them shared a brief yet awkward laugh and shook hands once more.

“I’ll have the papers drawn up first thing on Monday, so we should be able to close in no time, Mary,” he said. She knew he was elated to have unloaded this desolate property, and that was just the icing on the cake for her. Hopefully, this endeavor would help Mary feel some sense of permanence, representing a commitment that she’d never deliberately made of her own volition.

Excited at the new adventure she was about to embark upon, Mary sat in her car and called her sister Jean to announce the good news.

“Jeanie, you’ll never guess what I did today – I’m actually buying a house!” she said excitedly into her cell phone. “I’ve never owned more than a car or a dog, isn’t this nuts?” she said, almost laughing.

Jean replied, “Well, you’re obviously growing some roots there, anyways. But if you get sick of it, you can always move back! I’m sure Lee wouldn’t mind you shacking up in our spare bedroom.”

Jean’s sarcasm thinly veiled her concern. Nobody knew what was going through Mary’s head these past few weeks, but at least she didn’t seem to be hurting anyone – especially herself.

The sisters spoke maybe once every month or two even when she was in Albuquerque, and the frequency of their discussions was already waning in her new city. Jean was unaware of Mary’s reasons for leaving, but assumed that she wanted to explore the world and herself before she got too old or too set in her ways to force a change. It wasn’t that unusual that the two wouldn’t chat more often, they had always maintained one of those friendships you have with people from grammar school – the ones where you could limit communications to an annual Christmas card, but once you did talk, you picked up right where you left off as though it was yesterday.

Mary, on the other hand, was making a more deliberate effort to reduce their communications. Even though Jean was family, she needed to take a break from everything that represented her old life. Anyone and anything was a potential

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reminder of a harder period that – with time – she could learn to deal with in a more confrontational way. But she wasn't ready. At the moment, Mary was running away just as much as she was seeking variety. The isolation of this new lifestyle should afford Mary the opportunity to think clearly and sort out what it is she really wanted. She didn't feel as though she could truly make that decision on her own if she allowed those old influences to maintain a presence.

After only a few minutes, she ended the call. Mary, quite excited, nervous, and yet extraordinarily confident, stared at the house for a few more minutes, and then slowly pulled away. She couldn't help but wonder if this was a huge mistake. What if she hated it and then couldn't find another buyer? And then again, what if she absolutely loved it? That would be the best outcome, although it would almost certainly mean permanently severing ties in Albuquerque, which was good and yet very scary. So many unknowns make for an exciting time full of hope and doubt. If anyone could deal with it, it was probably her.

The next morning Mary awoke in her small, month-to-month rented apartment with an unusual sense of optimism that had been absent for years. It was the strange tinge of excitement one experiences when they are really looking forward to something, much like a child on Christmas Eve. It had been so long since she had looked forward to anything, especially something that she could openly share with others. This was a good time in her life, and her future was blossoming. With each book, each towel she packed into a box, she felt more confident that she was doing the right thing.